Whose voices are heard in the news? A study of media sources in television coverage of the Scottish independence referendum

Marina Dekavalla and Alenka Jelen

University of Stirling

Abstract

This article explores the prominence of different types of sources in the coverage of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum on BBC Scotland's regional news bulletin. Although literature suggests that elite sources, with their prominent status, credibility and sophisticated public relations, are traditionally favoured by daily news production routines, there is a lack of consistent definition and typology of media sources in theory and practice. This study combines the most commonly used classifications in the field and develops a taxonomy in which *official, unofficial, expert* and *confidential sources* are defined and classified according to their status as *news shapers* or *news makers* and *elite* or *non-elite*. This taxonomy is used to analyse the referendum coverage on BBC's *Reporting Scotland* in the final month of the campaign. Findings suggest that, despite the presence of many different types of sources, male-dominated political elites were the main focus in the news. Public relations was almost never explicitly named as a source, even though it was very likely present behind the scenes.

Keywords: Media sources, news discourse, taxonomy of sources, independence referendum, television.

Introduction

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum was arguably one of the biggest political events in Europe that year. Scottish voters were called to decide whether their nation would remain a part of the UK or become an independent country. Eventually 55% of the electorate decided that Scotland should stay in the UK, but the campaign will primarily be remembered for the unprecedented engagement of citizens in the democratic process in terms of voting (84.6% of the registered electorate voted, the highest turnout in any UK election or referendum), participating in grassroots politics and debates and reversing a long-standing trend of political disengagement (Cramb, 2015).

News accounts in the last weeks of the campaign and in the aftermath of the vote highlighted the significance of this legacy, whereby politics was seen as becoming increasingly relevant for ordinary citizens and less the realm of professional politicians and their public relations. To what extent though was this reflected in the range of voices heard in the news reporting on the referendum? This paper looks at the coverage of the final month of the campaign on BBC Scotland's early evening regional news bulletin (*Reporting Scotland*) and explores the access which different types of sources were given to the mediated debate.

Our study develops a new taxonomy of media sources, which combines the most commonly accepted and influential definitions and classifications in the literature. The traditional categories of *official sources* (sources with recognized political, organisational or social function), *unofficial sources* ('ordinary' individuals), *experts* (knowledgeable individuals) and *confidential sources* (off the record) are defined and classified according to their status as *news shapers* or *news makers* (Soley, 1992) and *elite* or *non-elite* (Poler Kovačič, 2004b) – both dichotomies representing important factors of influence on news. Our

analysis then contextualises findings within normative requirements of democratic theory, regarding how the media may promote democratic inclusion and participation.

Definitions and taxonomy of sources

News sources are individuals, who contribute to media content by providing newsworthy information to journalists and, as such, they are an integral part of daily journalistic routines (Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997; Laban, 2004). Gans (1979) defines them as "the actors whom journalists observe or interview, including interviewees who appear on the air or who are quoted […] in articles, and those who only supply background information or story suggestions" (p.80). Recognizing their strategic communication role, Johnson-Cartee (2005) labels them as "news promoters", namely "those individuals or groups, who draw attention to occurrences" and promote them into "public events" (p.183). These conceptualizations cover a diversity of sources and ways of providing information to the media, yet our study only focuses on sources that overtly appear and/or are referenced in the news. While there have been several attempts at a typology of these sources in public relations and journalism sociology literature alike, as will be seen below, there is a lack of consistent understanding of different categories, leading to theoretical confusion and analytical ambiguity (Davis, 2003).

Gans (1979) established an early typology of sources, differentiating between *knowns* (or already known individuals, such as politicians and government officials) and *unknowns* (or "ordinary" people). At about the same time, Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts (1978) talk of *accredited sources*, who become "primary definers" in the news (they get the first say in how a news event is interpreted) because of the power accorded to them by their institutional position, their representative status (for elected politicians or representatives of interest groups) or their knowledge and expertise in a certain area. Journalists, according to

the same account, prefer these sources because they carry institutional authority and are seen as providing "objective" or at least "authoritative" statements, which journalists need in order to produce credible stories. "Secondary definers", by contrast, do not enjoy this high status and have a complementary role in media accounts.

Many authors make similar distinctions between *official* (Gans's knowns or Hall et al.'s accredited sources) and *unofficial* (Gans's unknowns or "ordinary" citizens) sources or *elites* and *non-elites* (Cottle, 1993; Fishman, 1980; Sigal, 1973). Like the distinction between "primary" and "secondary definers", these categorisations share a focus on the power imbalance between official and non-official sources in accessing media space, but they do not account for differences *within* these groups (Manning, 2001, p.140). Not all official sources or primary definers are equally powerful in getting their perspectives heard, there are often power struggles between official sources in defining an event, primary definitions may be dislodged by other definitions, and powerful sources may lose power over time (Anderson, 2003; Schlesinger, 1990). Similarly, not all non-official sources face the same obstacles in securing journalistic attention (Manning, 2001).

Although most of the above taxonomies place *experts* in the same category as official sources, other authors argue that they should be classified separately, as expertise makes their contribution distinctive (Boyce, 2006; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Another category, which may be treated separately, is *confidential sources,* who may belong in either group but who, for various reasons, do not wish to be named (Laban, 2004; 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

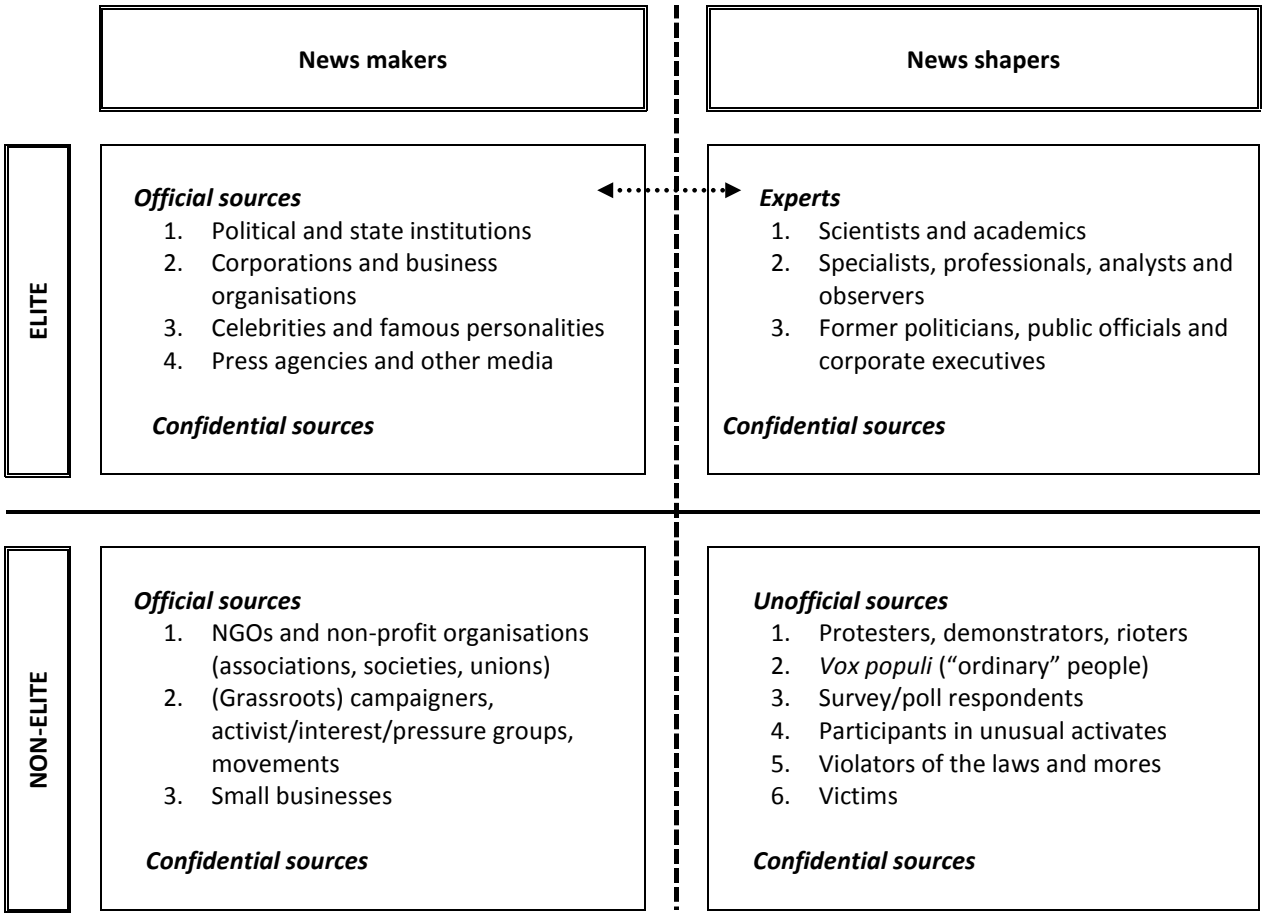
Amongst these general types of sources, Soley (1992) also distinguishes between *news makers* and *news shapers;* news makers (e.g. government officials) are individuals who represent a legitimate focus for the news, whereas news shapers provide analytical and explanatory background for stories, enable audiences to make sense of the news and lend

detachment and legitimacy to stories, but are not themselves the focus of the news. Combining these definitions and classifications of sources, we develop a new taxonomy (Figure 1), which forms the basis of our theoretical and empirical discussion.

Towards an integrated taxonomy of news sources

The taxonomy model we propose below allows a more consistent, detailed and in-depth understanding of the range of sources and their influence in the news than previous accounts focusing on individual factors. The different categories represent rather ideal types and may in reality occasionally intertwine.

Figure 1. Taxonomy model of news sources



The news makers: elite and non-elite official sources

Poler Kovačič (2004a) defines official sources as sources determined by their function: elected or appointed public officials, bearers of political or economic power, representatives of governance institutions or authorities (economic, political, cultural, scientific, religious etc.), representatives of NGOs, societies, associations or civic initiatives, who "speak" on the basis of their position in an organisation. Official sources talk about an event in their capacity as an authorised representative of an organisation or society: they may be high-ranking officials within their organisations or public relations professionals. More often than not, they initiate stories, thus hold *news maker* status. Due to their diversity, it is necessary to distinguish between elite and non-elite official sources: the former have higher political, economic or social power, legitimacy, credibility, social status and public relations resources, giving them more potential to influence media content, which the latter often lack (Cottle, 2003; Johnson-Cartee, 2005; Reese, Grant & Danielian, 1994).

Elite official sources include political and state institutions, political campaigns, corporate, business and economic organisations, celebrities, as well as news agencies and other media, from which journalists get information (Poler Kovačič, 2004a; 2004b; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Amongst them, political sources in particular represent the most used and influential sources in the media (Davis, 2003; 2010). Due to their elite status and power in society, these sources do not only enjoy high attention and privileged access to media debate (Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 1978; Johnson-Cartee, 2005; van Dijk, 1998), but are also under increasing pressure to be constantly available to journalists (Laban, 2004). Hence public relations professionals are important for these sources to proactively promote their messages, ensure openness and responsiveness in dealings with the media, but also to reduce the risk of conflict and avert publicity crises (Callison & Seltzer, 2010; Jahansoozi, 2006).

Elite official sources tend to have well-established public relations departments, developing sophisticated media relations strategies enhancing their already high influence in the news.

Studies in public relations and journalism sociology testify to the high influence of elite official sources and their public relations in the news with some indicating that they represent between 50 and 75% of sources used by journalists (Bentele, 2004; Cottle, 2003; Froelich & Rüdriger, 2006; Laban, 2004; 2007; Lewis Williams & Franklin, 2008a; Poler Kovačič, 2004a; 2004b; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Sigal 1973; Whitney, Sumpter & McQuail, 2004). The increasing professionalization of public relations and the dominance of the market model in journalism (Froehlich & Rüdiger, 2006; Johnson-Cartee 2005; McNair, 2003; Kim & Bae, 2006; Taylor, 2009) allow these sources to "clearly set, frame and build considerable portions of the agenda for the news media and the public" (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, p.152), with some critics arguing that the news media simply represent an ideological construct based on the interpretations, definitions and views of elite sources (Johnson-Cartee, 2005; Laban, 2004).

However, the use of public relations is not always transparent in news texts, as public relations professionals often brief the media and provide information on stories for which they are not credited, either because they wish to remain anonymous or because journalists decide not to identify them (Laban, 2004; 2007). Journalists are often reluctant to acknowledge their dependency on public relations, which they see as having lower status than information from "real" sources (Kim & Bae, 2006). Public relations materials, occasionally used verbatim in news reports, may go unacknowledged in up to 70% of cases (Laban, 2004); a practice that would in any other context be seen as plagiarism (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas & Mosdell, 2008c).

Also increasingly assisted by public relations, non-elite official sources include non-profit and non-governmental organisations (charities, voluntary organisations, associations, societies, unions, communities), movements, and interest, activist and pressure groups (Davis, 2003; Deacon, 2003), but also small businesses. Non-elite officials enjoy lower status of legitimacy, trustworthiness and credibility than their elite counterparts, which is also reflected in their lower visibility and presence in media discourse (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). However, these non-elites are increasingly challenging the "hierarchy of credibility" by becoming a legitimate and authoritative source in the news, often with the help of public relations (Davis, 2003). As Sallot and Johnson (2006b) emphasise, "many non-profit organisations would not get coverage for their services if it were not for [public relations] practitioners contacting media and writing impressive and persuasive pitches" (p.84). This indicates that there are still differences in the way elite and non-elite official sources secure media space: while journalists often seek out elites, non-elites have to invest more effort in "pushing" their stories onto the media agenda (Anderson, 2003).

The dominance of elite official sources in media discourse led to several studies treating them simply as "official sources" (Davis, 2003) and considering non-elite official sources as unofficial sources instead (Anderson, 2003; Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Non-elite official sources, however, still represent sources according to their function, who speak in the media on behalf of their organisation and thus differ significantly from unofficial sources (Anderson, 2003; Poler Kovačič, 2004b).

The news shapers: unofficial sources and experts

Unofficial sources are not sources because of their function, but ordinary people, participants in events, eyewitnesses, people on the street etc. (Poler Kovačič, 2004a; 2004b; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Laban (2004) conceptualises them as actors, who appear in the

news as "individuals with their own opinion, views, interpretation, information or event" (p.213). Based on Gans's (1979) five categories of unknowns, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) distinguish between protesters, rioters, strikers; victims; violators of the laws and mores; voters, survey respondents and other aggregates; and participants in unusual activities. Lacking power, cultural and communication capital, these sources are not news makers, nor leading actors in the news, except in cases when they become involved in an extraordinary event, or in deviant behaviour (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; van Dijk, 1995). Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005) offer an extensive analysis of the conditions in which ordinary citizens appear in the news: they are either interviewed directly (*vox populi*) or included in more indirect ways, e.g. in reports of opinion polls, yet most commonly they are represented through unsubstantiated inferences about what they think or say. Their perspectives are, therefore, more often talked about by journalists than voiced by themselves directly.

The credibility of citizen voices in the news comes from their personal experience, rather than from authority, strategic communication capacity, elite social status or knowledge (Pan & Kosicki, 2001). L'Etang (2004) critically observes that increasing dominance of public relations techniques in the public sphere further reduces the communication space for ordinary citizens to express their views and concerns in mediated public debates. Galtung and Ruge (1965) similarly observe that "in an elite-centered news communication system ordinary people are not even given the chance of representing themselves" (p.68). Empirical research indeed indicates that these sources are the least represented in the media, with their presence ranging from 4% to 20% of sources in the news (Dilevko, 1996; Laban, 2004; Poler Kovačič, 2004a; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Unlike unofficial sources, experts have elite status in today's knowledge societies and are according to Johnson-Cartee (2005) the second (after elite officials) most relevant media

source, "relied on by journalists to put events into context and explain the meaning of news" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p.130). Experts include academics and scientists, noted observers and scholars, knowledgeable individuals, former government representatives, politicians and other actors, who have extensive knowledge about social and political issues (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). It is this knowledge that gives them elite status and legitimates their position as analysts of the meaning of news events (Boyce, 2006). In addition to their knowledge, experts' media access also depends on their public relations skills in working with the media and their relationships with actors within political communities (Davis, 2010; Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Reese et al., 1994). Even though they can be supporters of a political cause or former official sources, experts often appear as neutral sources, giving "objective" and "impartial" analysis of a situation (Larsson, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Confidential sources

Confidential (*off the* record, unnamed) sources often transfer or leak information informally and unofficially (Laban, 2004; 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Hence, they are sometimes considered unofficial sources, which is not always appropriate based on the above definitions, as they may be (and most often are) elite officials. Any social actor can act as a confidential source and the information they provide can either under no circumstances be used by journalists, or can be used, but cannot be attributed to the source (concealed in journalistic discourse with phrases "we found out", "it seems", "it is believed" etc.), or can be attributed to the source, but without explicit identification (concealed with generalizations, such as "according to official / well informed sources") (Perovič & Šipek, 1998). Although their anonymity obscures their ideological position, goals and motives, these "faceless" sources are an essential part of news production and a precondition for the free flow of information in modern democracies (Johnson-Cartee, 2005; NUJ Code of Conduct, 2011).

The Scottish independence referendum and the campaigns

The Scottish independence referendum took place on 18 September 2014. The discussions about it in the media started much earlier though, with the Scottish National Party's (SNP) win in the 2011 Scottish Election (Carrell, 2011). *Yes Scotland*, the campaign supporting independence, was launched in May 2012 and *Better Together*, which supported staying in the UK, just a month later. This referendum campaign was arguably one of the longest political campaigns in the UK.

Better Together involved the three biggest UK parties with branches in Scotland: Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. All three had been in government in Westminster or in Scotland, alone or in coalitions, in the past. Although they agreed on their stance against Scottish independence, there were still underlying political differences between the three parties, which represented different positions in the political spectrum and remained opponents contesting for government in London and Scotland. There was, therefore, a perceived need among both broadcasters and the parties themselves to have balance between their individual perspectives.

Yes Scotland included the SNP, the Scottish Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party – with the SNP being the biggest party in that campaign and the only one that had ever been in government. In addition to the official campaigns, grassroots groups formed during the campaign (e.g. Women for Independence, Working for Scotland) and they organised parallel communication activities, including public meetings and online media.

The two campaigns invested heavily in communications resources. In interviews with (author name removed for peer review), political communicators from both sides revealed that, in the last months before the vote, 6-8 people were working in media relations on each side. Apart from the "umbrella" campaigns, the political parties participating in each

campaign also had their own media relations strategies. Communication teams were in regular contact with broadcasters, organising events for them to cover, arranging for their representatives to appear in interviews and debates, and alerting channels to public appearances of their leading figures.

The same interviews suggested that, in addition to the media campaign, the strategy of the Yes side was to involve ordinary citizens and local communities from the early stages. This meant asking those who supported independence to persuade others in their communities, their workplace and social circle, and to mobilise support at grassroots level through local groups and public meetings. This is because strategists in the Yes campaign felt that people are more likely to be persuaded by people they know, rather than by mainstream media or politicians, who, according to them, had lost public trust. As a result, part of their media strategy was to have non-politicians speaking for the campaign on television as often as possible.

Civil society organisations were mostly neutral in the campaign. This is in contrast to the 1997 Scottish devolution referendum, where Scottish civil society "was crucial in leading the […] campaign for home rule" (Paterson & Wyn Jones, 1999, p.193). In interviews with (author name removed for peer review), representatives of civil society organisations suggested that they saw their role in the campaign as drawing attention to issues like democratic participation, poverty, welfare, local democracy, which might otherwise not have been key in the debate. In order to promote these issues, they organised events and public meetings, run websites and blogs, sent out press releases, and were occasionally interviewed by the media. They felt that their efforts were successful in attracting media attention, but they also thought that they were not seen as, neither intended to become, central participants in the debate. In their view, the media debate was more open to politicians and those who

would give a straightforward answer to the binary question of the referendum, rather than to neutral organisations who would not provide direct answers.

Broadcasting regulations in the UK do not allow television to favour political sides and both public service and commercial broadcasters are obliged to provide due impartiality and equal space to different political perspectives (McNair, 2009). Newspapers are allowed to openly express political allegiances, however, only one newspaper in Scotland (*Sunday Herald*) positioned itself in favour of independence.

Method

Using the typology of sources described earlier, we sought to establish which types of sources were most prominent and whose voices were heard less in the coverage of the independence referendum. We conducted a source analysis (*cf.* Reese et al., 1994) of BBC Scotland's regional news bulletin *Reporting Scotland*, which is the most watched daily news programme in Scotland (BBC Scotland Management Review, 2013/2014), to determine sources' presence in the news in the final month of the campaign. By contrast to the UK-wide bulletin *BBC News at Six*, *Reporting Scotland* is produced specifically for a Scottish audience, who would be voting in the referendum. The final month represents a significant period, when coverage is expected to peak (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002). With the date of the vote approaching, undecided voters have to reach a decision and the media need to provide information that allows the electorate to participate in the political process.

Between 18 August and 18 September 2014, *Reporting Scotland* broadcasted 123 news stories about the referendum. Each news story represented a unit of analysis, within which we identified and categorised the sources using our integrated taxonomy. We measured the frequency of their appearance and airtime dedicated to their views, and

recorded how each source was included (paraphrased by journalists, statement in front of the camera, or interview), which side of the independence argument sources represented (Yes, No or neutral/unidentifiable position), their gender (male, female or unidentified) and the patterns in which they were used within the story (identified openly or reported anonymously; used just once or re-used; presented as responding to others or providing new arguments). We also looked for any explicit references to public relations as a source in the coverage. The data was analysed with SPSS. We used descriptive statistics and tested statistical significance and strength of associations with Pearson's Chi-square test and Phi/Cramer's V coefficient between nominal variables, and t-test and one-way ANOVA between scale and nominal variables.

Findings and discussion

The 123 stories we analysed were a total of 14 hours and 8 minutes long, and featured 722 sources, who were given just over 5 hours and 16 minutes in total, with 26 seconds average airtime per source. Each story featured on average 5.9 different sources. Almost half of the sources were paraphrased (48.8%), which means they had the lowest level of control over how their words were represented. 41.7% of sources made brief statements on camera, while 9.6% appeared in longer interviews, which allowed them the highest level of control/influence over their representation. The average level of influence (with values 1-paraphrasing, 2-camera statement, 3-interview) was 1.6.

The dominance of elite official sources

As would be expected from our earlier discussion, elite official sources were by far the most prominent type of source in the coverage. More than half (59.7%) of all the sources we identified belong to this category (Figure 2), occupying 71.1% of the total airtime ($\mu = 31$

seconds) given to all sources (Figure 3). This trend, as discussed in more detail in previous sections, has been previously attributed to a range of factors, from journalistic routines that see official elite sources as more credible (Cottle, 2003; Hall et al., 1978; Johnson-Cartee, 2005; Reese et al., 1994) to the increased professionalization of public relations and its extensive penetration in most elite organisations and particularly in political organisations (Froehlich & Rüdiger, 2006; Johnson-Cartee 2005; McNair, 2003). Indeed, the great majority of the elite sources we found were representatives of the official Yes and No campaigns and of the political parties, as well as the Scottish and UK Governments. Political sources amounted to 77.3% of elite official sources and almost half (46.1%) of all the sources we identified. Business sources accounted for 14.6% of elite sources, while other subcategories (media, celebrities and prominent figures) had marginal presence. However, although elite officials dominated the coverage in terms of both frequency and airtime, they were not allowed the most control in how their views were represented: more than half (56.6%) of them were paraphrased, followed by just over one third (36%) camera statements and a small proportion of interviews (7.4%) with a mean influence slightly below the average ($\mu = 1.5$).

Public relations representatives were explicitly mentioned only once, when a source was referred to as a "spokesman" for the financial industry. Considering that both sides of the campaign and the political parties involved employed strong media relations teams in the final month, their apparent "absence" from the foreground confirms Laban's (2004) suggestion that journalists are reluctant to identify public relations sources and prefer to use generic references (e.g. Yes Scotland, Better Together, the Scottish Government etc.), or recognisable officials from these organisations instead. The background influence and presence of public relations sources in media discourse was likely much higher than data suggest, but further research comparing public relations materials with news coverage would be needed to verify this.

The second most prominent category of sources in the coverage was unofficial sources, which made up 19.8% of the total number of sources. This finding seems in line with previous research suggesting that unofficial sources represent a fifth of news sources maximum (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Even without the support of organised media relations, unofficial sources claimed a significant presence in the coverage. This, however, did not entail equal media space to voice their views as they had only 8.5% of the total airtime (with low μ = 11 seconds) given to sources, significantly less than elite and slightly less than non-elite official sources (Figure 3). The vast majority of unofficial sources (79.7%) were ordinary citizens, who in more than two thirds of cases appeared in front of the camera giving a statement or an interview. The second most common way of representing citizens' views was through public opinion polls (12.6% of unofficial sources), while other categories had marginal presence. Although the time they were given was relatively short, they were allowed to represent their views in their own words (μ = 1.8), more often than elite official sources. This to an extent contradicts Lewis et al.'s (2005) suggestion that unofficial sources' views are more often talked about by journalists than voiced by themselves directly. The role of ordinary citizens in referendum news was primarily to lend authenticity to reports in their function as voters, and perhaps for this reason they were shown speaking on camera more often than they were paraphrased.

Non-elite official sources were the third most prominent category (10.7% of sources) in terms of frequency and second most prominent in terms of airtime (11.5%; μ = 28 seconds). Campaigners, grassroots organisations and movements were the most dominant group among them (67.5% of non-elite official sources), followed by small businesses (16.9%) and NGOs/non-profit organisations (15.6%). Similarly to unofficial sources, non-elite officials had relatively high control over how their views were presented (μ = 1.9). Despite their relative success in getting coverage, non-elite officials did not challenge the

"hierarchy of credibility" as much as would be expected considering the high involvement of grassroots movements in the referendum campaign (*cf.* Anderson, 2003; Davis, 2003): their non-elite status still meant that they were significantly less represented in the news than their elite counterparts.

Experts were somewhat surprisingly the least frequently used type of source in our taxonomy (5.7% of all sources with 6.8% of airtime, yet the highest μ = 32 seconds). In most cases they appeared in front of the camera (μ = 1.9). In more than two thirds of cases, experts were academics, followed by specialists/analysts/observers and former elite officials. Confidential and unaccounted sources were only marginally present.

In general, the more elite the source, the more airtime was allocated to them (association between source category and average airtime was statistically significant, p = 0.004). This was not the case though with the control they were allowed over the presentation of their views, with elite officials shown speaking on camera less than other categories.

Figure 2. Frequency of different types of sources

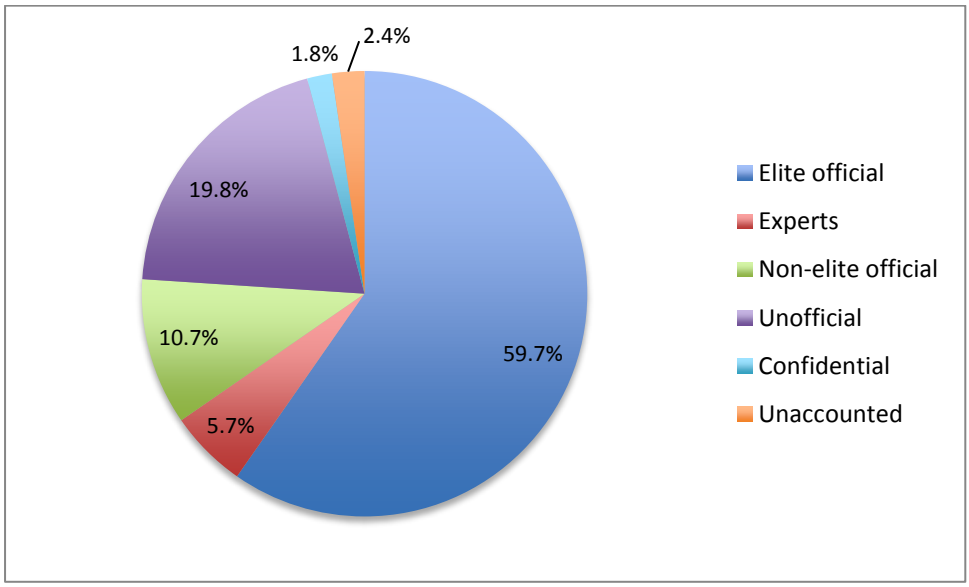
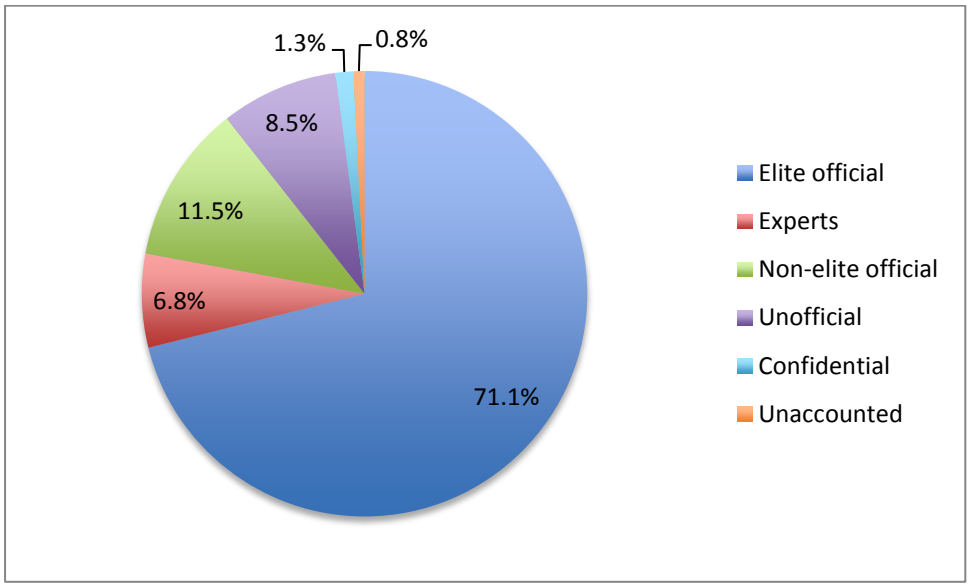


Figure 3. Airtime of different types of sources



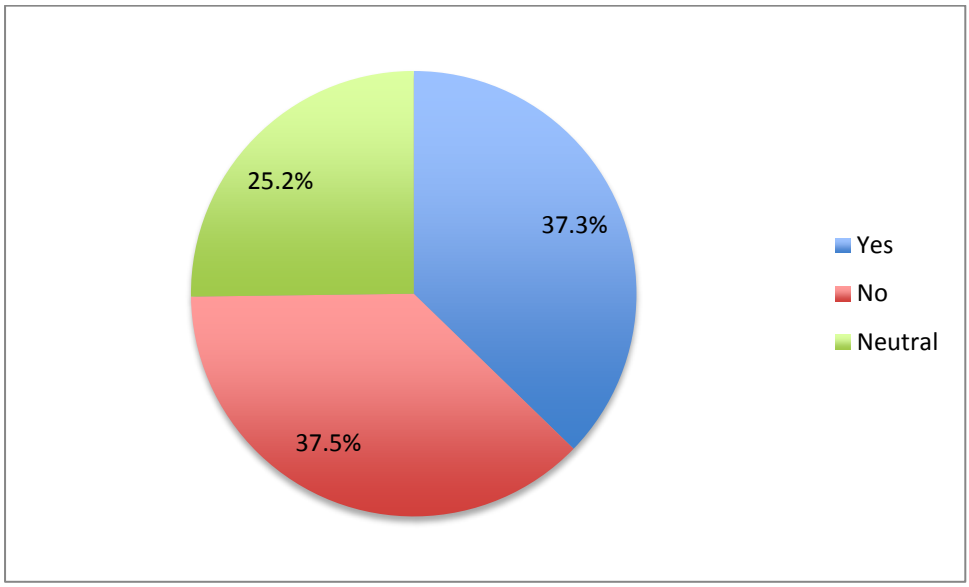
It has often been argued (Gamson, 2001; Lewis et al., 2005) that in order to promote a more active citizenry and more participation of the public in common affairs, the media need to include ordinary citizen voices. Our findings suggest that non-elite sources had noticeable presence in the news coverage. Taken together, non-elite sources accounted for 30.5% of all sources, occupied 20% of airtime, and tended to present their views in their own words more often than elite officials, which is more than would be expected based on previous studies (Bennett et al., 2004; Feree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002). In the case of the Scottish referendum though, this is consistent with the high level of involvement and engagement of the public with the political process (Cramb, 2015), which seems to be reflected in the BBC's account. Even so, elite sources were more than twice as prominent (65.4% of the sources) and were given almost 4-times more airtime (77.9%), suggesting that no matter how involved non-elites are in the political process, elites (and especially politicians) are still seen by journalists as *de facto* news makers. This dominance of elites in political coverage is widely seen as contributing to the reproduction of a liberal perception of politics as the domain of

politicians (Feree et al., 2002; Lewis et al., 2005) and is consistent with previous studies of political coverage in Scottish media (Crawford, 2009; Dekavalla, 2012).

Balance between Yes and No sources

Balance between the perspectives of sources supporting the two sides of the referendum argument seemed to be a significant consideration. We found 37.3% of all sources favouring a Yes vote and 37.5% for a No vote, while the remaining quarter were neutral (Figure 4). Broadcasting regulations require television news to provide due impartiality (McNair, 2009), which has traditionally been interpreted as an opportunity for all participants to express their viewpoints. Understood in this sense, it is clear that the news programme we examined adhered to these requirements in frequency of appearance and – albeit slightly less – airtime given to each side. No sources received 42.1% of the time dedicated to all sources, while Yes received 40.4%, with the rest of the time devoted to neutral sources.

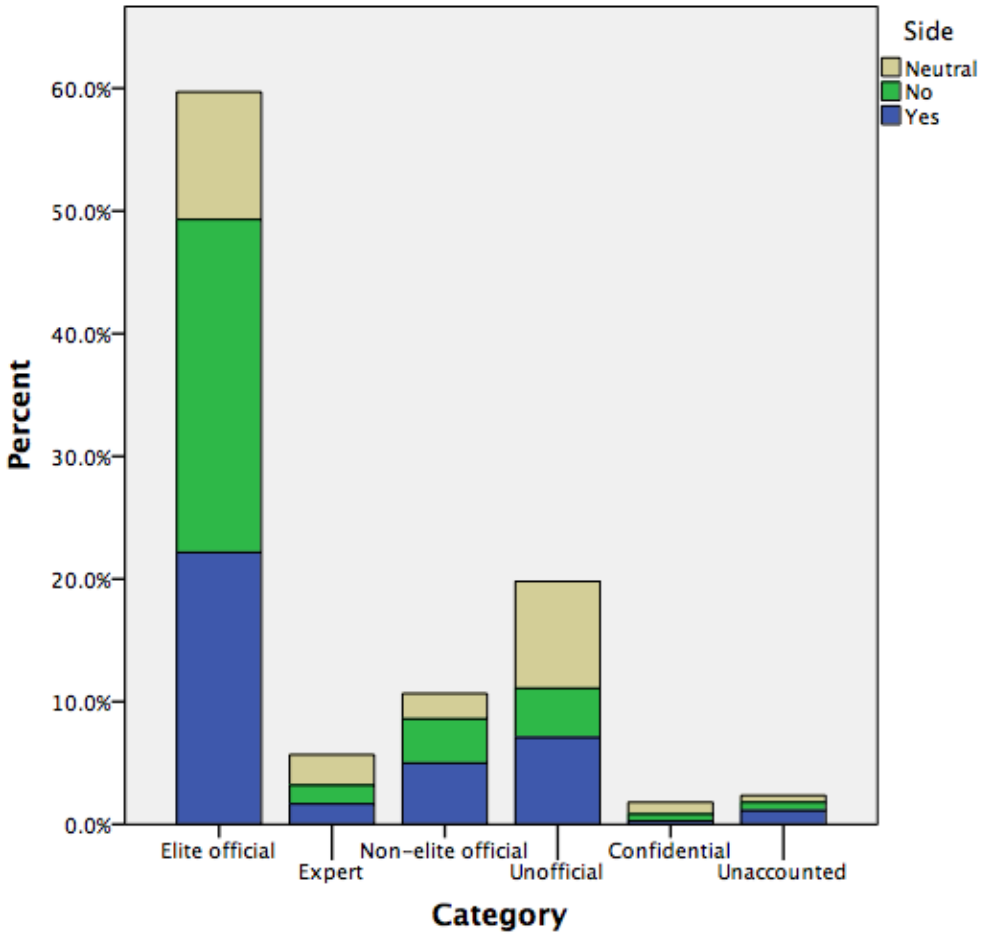
Figure 4. Frequency of Yes, No and neutral sources



Turning to the types of sources that supported each side (Figure 5), we found a statistically significant association (p = 0.000; φ_c = 0.21) between source category and advocated side. The No side had more elite official sources endorsing it (45.5% for No, 37.1% for Yes), particularly elite businesses (57.1% for No, 19.0% for Yes). The only elite sources that advocated Yes more often than No were celebrities. The Yes side, on the other hand, had significantly higher support from non-elite sources: non-elite official (46.8% for Yes, 33.8% for No) and unofficial sources (35.7% for Yes, 20.3% for No) were largely in favour of independence. This is in line with the campaigning strategies of the two sides; as discussed in a previous section, interviews with (author's name removed for peer review) suggested that the Yes campaign made a decision to be represented by non-politicians in media debates, when possible.

Experts, on the other hand, most often appeared as neutral (43.9%), as would be expected from their role as knowledgeable analysts of news events (Larsson, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Another category with a high percentage of neutral sources was unofficial sources (44.1%), perhaps reflecting the indecisiveness of voters until the end of the campaign and the close results of opinion polls.

Figure 5. Source categories and sides taken in the referendum debate



A male-dominated debate

The study found great inequality in terms of gender representation. Men were almost three times as prominent as women (42.2% of all sources versus 16.6%), while in 41.1% of cases the gender of the source could not be determined due to generic references. If we exclude these generic sources, men represented over 71.8% of sources (with 80.1% of airtime) and women 28.2% of sources (19.9% of airtime); the difference in airtime between the two genders was statistically significant (p = 0.004). Male sources dominated every category, apart from non-elite official sources, where men and women were equally represented. Elite sources were particularly male-dominated, with men over 4-times more

commonly used than women, an association that we found to be strongly statistically significant ($p = 0.000$; $\varphi = 0.31$).

Men were more often No (43.0%) than Yes supporters (36.1%), while women were more often for Yes (38.3%) rather than No (31.7%). Women also appeared neutral more often (30%) than men (21%). The association between gender and side is not statistically significant ($p = 0.054$) though. Taking gender, category and side into account (Table 1), by far the most utilised sources were male elites advocating a No position.

Table 1. Sources (N) according to category, gender and side

	Yes		No		Neutral		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Elite official	66	22	104	9	26	11	238
Expert	9	1	8	2	10	3	33
Non-elite official	12	12	7	11	6	2	50
Unofficial	23	11	12	16	22	20	104
Total	110	46	131	38	64	36	425*

*297 sources (41.1%), whose gender could not be determined, are excluded from this count.

A polarised debate between political elites

There was very little dialogue between sources, or engagement with what each other had to say: 69.9% of all sources introduced new arguments but did not respond to anyone else's. This finding confirms previous research that has found little deliberation and engagement between news sources (Crawford, 2009; Feree et al., 2002). This is significant because engagement with opponent arguments is a key requirement for a well-functioning public sphere (Bennett et al., 2004) – when sources just present their own views but fail to address each other's perspectives, they do not facilitate democratic deliberation. Although the tendency not to respond to others' arguments was consistent across categories, the highest level of engagement and dialogue was found among elite sources (37.6% of elite officials and

34.1% of experts responded to previously expressed views). Non-elite official and unofficial sources were the least involved in responding to others (both just under 15%). This result was statistically significant (p = 0.000; φ= 0.23), confirming Bennett et al.'s (2004) finding that different social strata are rarely presented as engaging in dialogue with each other in news reports.

Yes and No sources were far more likely to engage in dialogue than neutral sources. While one third of Yes and No sources responded to already expressed views, neutral sources in their majority (86.3%) introduced new views with this difference being statistically significant (p = 0.000; φ= 0.21). The discussion was, therefore, polarised between the Yes and No sides, while neutral sources appeared as an additional voice, detached from the conversation.

Conclusion

By distinguishing between types of sources that other taxonomies often classify together (for instance, elite versus non-elite official; non-elite official versus unofficial; elite official versus experts), the taxonomy we have proposed in this article allows a more nuanced and detailed account of who is allowed access to the news debate. It therefore makes an original contribution to the study of news sources and can be used in a range of contexts to deliver more in-depth insights into the relationship between journalists and their sources.

In our own analysis, the taxonomy highlighted differences between elite and non-elite official sources in their level of access to the debate, with the former clearly dominating news reports and the latter lagging behind even unofficial sources. By contrast, we found that, despite being elite, experts did not have a very prominent position in the coverage. Our analysis, therefore, suggests that the relationship between the status of a source category as

elite or official and the frequency with which this type of source appears in the news is not as straightforward as academic literature on sources might lead us to believe. In the case of the referendum, although the coverage was led by the political elite as would be expected, ordinary citizens appeared more often than non-elite organisations or experts, and lent the coverage the "authenticity" of their voices. This authenticity was important when reporting on a political event that generated so much engagement among the electorate, and it might potentially have helped to generate more. Lewis et al. (2005) argue that the media can contribute to an engaged citizenry by providing audiences with examples of engaged citizens in their coverage. In our study, *Reporting Scotland* did provide several examples of voters discussing the referendum in their own voice, although the length of time they were offered to speak was less than that given to more elite and official sources.

In general, whether a source category was elite or non-elite seemed to have a more straightforward relationship with the amount of airtime its members enjoyed, than with frequency of inclusion. Our findings suggest that elite sources consistently got more airtime than non-elite sources. This distinction between the amount of airtime and frequency of appearance of elite/non-elite and official/unofficial sources in the news is worth further investigation in research on other types of news events.

Reporting Scotland provided equal space for both Yes and No sides to express their views. The composition of sources speaking for the two sides was different though: non-elite official, unofficial and expert sources, in this order, were more likely to advocate a Yes position, while the No side had higher support amongst elite official sources, who strongly dominated the news.

Our finding that elite official sources, particularly male politicians, were the most dominant sources in terms of frequency and airtime, confirms a trend established in the

literature for several decades: that elite political sources, presumably strongly supported by public relations strategists, are the key newsmakers in any major political event. The domination of elite politicians is consistent with liberal democratic approaches regarding the role of the media in the public sphere (Bennett et al., 2004; Feree et al., 2002), which suggest that the media should represent the views of political organisations to the public, so that they can make an informed choice between what they propose. In addition, elite official sources are favoured because they carry authority that lends status and credibility to stories (Cottle, 2003; Davis, 2010; Hall et al., 1978; Johnson-Cartee, 2005), and because at a time of restricted resources in news organisations (McManus, 1994; Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008b), their public relations representatives offer easily accessible, newsworthy material, tailored to reporters' needs and hence increase their influence in the news (Froehlich & Rüdiger, 2006; Johnson-Cartee 2005; McNair, 2003).

Although the contribution of public relations to media reporting is presumably very high (Froelich & Rüdriger, 2006; Johnson-Cartee 2005; Sallot & Johnson, 2006a; 2006b; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), public relations practitioners were almost never explicitly mentioned in the news. It is likely that a lot of the generic references to (elite/official) sources that we found in our analysis originated from public relations (comparison of public relations materials with the coverage would be needed to quantify this), yet the reluctance to name them as such appears to lend support to Laban's (2004) suggestion that journalists do not see public relations professionals as having the same credibility as "real" sources, i.e. the organisations they represent and their leaders. While this covert presence of their contributions in the media might serve public relations well in the short-term, it implies damaging long-term consequences for the profession struggling with negative perceptions and striving to establish its contribution and credibility in democratic societies (Cottle, 2003; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009).

Acknowledgement

Marina Dekavalla holds an ESRC Future Research Leaders award for the project "Television framing of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum" and would like to acknowledge support by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/L010062/1).

References

Anderson, A. (2003). Environmental Activism and News Media. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *News, Public Relations and Power* (pp. 117–132). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

BBC Scotland Management Review 2013/2014. (2014). Retrieved from http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/2013-14/BBC_NR_MR_Scotland_201314_AP.pdf.

Bennett, W.L., Pickard, V., Iozzi, D., Schroeder, C., Lagos, T. & Caswell, C. (2004). Managing the public sphere: Journalistic construction of the great globalization debate. *Journal of Communication, 54*(3): 437-455.

Bentele, G. (2004). New perspectives of public relations in Europe. In B. van Ruler & D. Verčič (Eds.), *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice* (pp. 485–496). Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Boyce, T. (2006). Journalism and expertise. *Journalism Studies, 7*(6), 889–906.

Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M. & Curtin, P. A. (1997). Public Relations and the Production of News: A Critical Review and a Theoretical Framework. In B. Burleson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 20* (pp. 111–155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Carrell, S. (2011, May 6). Stunning SNP election victory throws spotlight on Scottish independence. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/may/06/snp-election-victory-scottish-independence.

Cottle, S. (1993). *TV News, Urban Conflict and the Inner City*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Cottle, S. (2003). News, Public Relations and Power: Mapping the Field. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *News, Public Relations and Power* (pp. 3–24). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Cramb, A. (2015, May 25). Why are Scots still more likely to vote than the rest of the country? *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11492445/Why-are-Scots-still-more-likely-to-vote-than-the-rest-of-the-country.html.

Crawford, E. (2009). A new sort of democracy? The opinion pages in the Scottish daily quality press. *Journalism*, *10*(4): 451–472.

Davis, A. (2003). Public Relations and News Sources. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *News, Public Relations and Power* (pp. 27–42). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

Davis, A. (2010). *Political Communication and Social Theory*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.

Deacon, D. (2003). Non-governmental Organisations and the Media. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *News, Public Relations and Power* (pp. 99–115). London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage.

Dekavalla, M. (2012). Evaluating newspaper performance in the public sphere: Press accounts of Westminster elections in Scotland and in England in the early post-devolution period. *Journalism*, *13*(3): 320–339.

de Vreese, C. & Semetko, H. (2002). Cynical and engaged: Strategic campaign coverage, public opinion, and mobilization in a referendum. *Communication Research*, *29*(6): 615–641.

Dilevko, J. (1996). Teaching news media practices in bibliographic instruction classes: A strategy involving framing and sourcing theory. *Research Strategies, 16*(1): 53–69.

Feree, M.M., Gamson, W.A. Gerhards, J. & Rucht, D. (2002). *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Fishman, M. (1980). *Manufacturing the news.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Froehlich, R. & Rüdiger, B. (2006). Framing political public relations: Measuring success of political communication strategies in Germany. *Public Relations Review,* 32: 18–25.

Galtung, J. & Ruge, M. H. (1965). The Structure of Foreign News. *Journal of Peace Research, 2*(1): 64–91.

Gamson, W.A. (2001). Promoting Political Engagement. In W.L. Bennett & R. M. Entman (Eds.), *Mediated Politics: Communication and the Future of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gans, H. J. (1979). *Deciding What's News: A study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time.* New York: Pantheon.

Hall, S., Critcher, T., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the State and law and order.* Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Ihlen, Ø. & van Ruler, B. (2009). Introduction: Applying Social Theory to Public Relations. In Ø. Ihlen, B. van Ruler & M. Fredriksson (Eds.), *Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures and Concepts* (pp. 1–20). New York, Oxon: Routledge.

Jahansoozi, J. (2006). Relationships, Transparency and Evaluation: Implications for Public Relations. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice* (pp. 61–91). Mahwah, New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Johnson-Cartee, K. S. (2005). *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kim, Y. & Bae, J. (2006). Korean practitioners and journalists: Relational influences in news selection. *Public Relations Review,* 32: 241 – 245.

Laban, V. (2004). Razvidnost virov informacij v televizijskih novinarskih besedilih. In M. Poler Kovačič & M. Kalin Golob (Eds.), *Poti slovenskega novinarstva – danes in jutri: Znanstveni zbornik ob 40. obletnici študija novinarstva na Slovenskem* (pp. 201–231). Ljubljana: FDV.

Laban, V. (2007). *Televizijsko novinarstvo: Hibridizacija žanrov in stilov.* Ljubljana: FDV.

Larsson, L. (2006). Public Relations and Democracy: A Swedish Perspective. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice* (pp. 123–141). Mahwah, New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

L'Etang, J. (2004). *Public Relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the 20th Century*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lewis, J., Inthorn, A. & Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2005). *Citizens or Consumers?: The Media and the Decline of Political Participation.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Lewis, J., Williams, A. & Franklin, B. (2008a). A Compromised Fourth Estate? UK News Journalism, Public Relations and News Sources. *Journalism Studies, 9*(1): 1–20.

Lewis, J., Williams, A. & Franklin, B. (2008b). Four Rumours and an Explanation; A Political Economic Account of Journalists' Changing Newsgathering and Reporting Practices. *Journalism Practice, 2*(1): 37–45.

Lewis, J., Williams, A., Franklin, B., Thomas, J. & Mosdell, N. (2008c). *The Quality and Independence of British Journalism: Tracking the changes over 20 years*. Retreived from http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/resources/QualityIndependenceofBritishJournalism.pdf.

Manning, P. (2001). *News and News Sources*. London: Sage.

McManus, J. H. (1994). *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage.

McNair, B. (2003). *An introduction to political communication.* London, New York: Routledge.

McNair, N. (2009). *News and Journalism in the UK*. Abingdon: Routledge.

NUJ Code of Conduct. (2011). Retrieved from: https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/.

Pan, Z. & Kosicki, G. M. (2001). Framing as Strategic Action in Public Deliberation. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy, Jr. & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World* (pp. 35–65). Mahwah, NJ, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Paterson, L. & Wyn Jones, R. (1999). Does civil society drive constitutional change? In B. Taylor & K. Thomson (Eds.), *Scotland and Wales: Nations again?* (pp.169–197). Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Perovič, T. & Šipek, Š. (1998). *TV novice.* Ljubljana: ŠOU, Študentska založba.

Poler Kovačič. M. (2004a). *Novinarska (iz)virnost: Novinarji in njihovi viri v sodobni slovenski družbi.* Ljubljana: FDV.

Poler Kovačič, M. (2004b). Novinarska rutina in (pre)moč uradnih virov informacij. *Teorija in praksa, 41*(3–4): 690–702.

Reese, S. D., Grant, A. & Danielian, L. H. (1994). The Structure of News Sources on Television: A Network Analysis of "CBS News," "Nightline," "MacNeil/Lehrer," and "This Week with David Brinkley". *Journal of Communication, 44*(2): 84–107.

Sallot, L. M. & Johnson, E. A. (2006a). Investigating relationships between journalists and public relations practitioners: Working together to set, frame and build the public agenda, 1991–2004. *Public Relations Review,* 32: 151–159.

Sallot, L. M. & Johnson, E. A. (2006b). To contact ... or not? Investigating journalists' assessments of public relations subsidies and contact preferences. *Public Relations Review,* 32: 83–86.

Schlesinger, P. (1990). Rethinking the sociology of journalism: Source strategies and the limits of media-centrism. In M. Ferguson (Ed.), *Public communication: Future directions for media research* (pp. 61-83). London: Sage.

Shin, J-H. & Cameron, G. T. (2003). Informal relations: A look at personal influence in media relations. *Journal of Communication Management, 7*(3): 239–253.

Shoemaker, P. J. & Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. New York: Longman.

Sigal, L. V. (1973). *Reporters and Officials.* Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.

Soley, L. C. (1992). *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News.* New York: Praeger.

Taylor, M. (2009). Protocol journalism as a framework for understanding public relations–media relationships in Kosovo. *Public Relations Review, 35*(1): 23-30.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Power and the News Media. In D. L. Paletz (Ed.), *Political Communication in Action: States, Institutions, Movements, Audiences* (pp. 9–36). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach.* London: Sage Publications.

Whitney, C. D., Sumpter, R. S. & McQuail, D. (2004). News Media Production: Individuals, Organizations, and Institutions. In J. D. H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger & E. Wartella (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies* (pp. 393–410). Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.